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• CO-OPERATION IN VICTORIA:

BETTER IF IT HAD
NEVER BEEN?!



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Handicapping Co-operative Development in Victoria

Since its socialist origin, co-operation has been alternatively embraced and/or eschewed by various ideologies.

Co-operation in Victoria is currently being perceived as a methodology - value free and independent of ideology.

This is exemplified by a close reading of the documents published by Victoria's Ministerial Advisory Committee on Co-operation (MACC) - an information paper, a report on education and training, a collection of working papers and seminar proceedings.

The four documents emphasise organizational, legislative and administrative arrangements. While they discuss co-operative philosophy and principles, the discussion tends to be general and vague - pregnant with self-evident assumptions and expectations.

Democracy Through Education, for instance, acknowledges that the content and presentation of education and training must be underpinned with co-operative ideology - without identifying, defining and discussing that ideology. Instead the absence of "unanimity on the nature and meaning" of the essence of co-operative philosophy is noted and it is concluded that "the application of co-operative philosophy and its principles varies according to co-operative type". (p 19)

MACC has completed its final report. Given its preceding documents, it is speculative that the report itself will provide an ideological impetus to co-operation. But, then, an ideological impetus must of necessity emanate from the co-operative movement itself.

Yet the Co-operative Federation of Victoria (CFV) has adhered to political and religious neutrality since its establishment in 1970.

Political and religious neutrality had been adopted as a principle by the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) in 1937. In the real world, however, co-operation is not neutral, and in 1966 the ICA abandoned neutrality as a principle - four years before the establishment of the CFV.

The eschewing of ideology and its significance is further exemplified in the search for a co-operative development model for Victoria - using successful overseas experiences in Mondragon, Italy and the Israeli Kibbutzim.

The expectation is that the ingredients of success can be imported into our own co-operative movement. Actual and/or perceived models, however, tend to evoke emulation. Emulation is imitative and tends to ignore specific historical, political, economic and cultural conditions. What is being emulated is the



form of co-operative development and not its substance.

Both Mondragon and Italy are successful examples of developed co-operative systems with economically viable enterprises, low enterprise failure rates, technically advanced enterprises and a sophisticated co-operative infrastructure.

Yet ideology has informed and sustained co-operative development in both Mondragon and Italy, and has provided the substance to their successful models of co-operative development. Co-operation in Italy has three spiritual families - liberal, Catholic and socialist.

It has already been noted that the CFV has publicly eschewed ideology for 16 years. In retrospect, this claimed neutrality could have been fatal to the development of co-operation in Victoria.

Co-operation in Victoria advanced rapidly between 1943 and 1970 with the ideological and organizational leadership of the Young Christian Workers (YCW) Co-operative Movement. Between 1943 and 1964 this Movement established a permanent building society, a trading and insurance co-operative, a land purchase co-operative, 23 housing co-operatives, 63 credit co-operatives and a co-operative development society.

The Co-operative Development Society (CDS) was established in 1962 to "safeguard the proper growth of the YCW Co-operative Movement in accordance with Christian co-operative principles". Between 1960 and 1968 44 issues of the *Co-operator* magazine were published and between 1961 and 1964 ten issues of a development bulletin were published.

The YCW Co-operative Movement was influenced by Canada's Antigonish Movement established in the 1930s at the University of St Francis Xavier, Nova Scotia, Canada. Adopting the six principles of the Antigonish Movement, the YCW Co-operative Movement affirmed:

1. The primacy of the individual.

All co-operatives believe that they can

achieve social good only by bettering the social conditions of individual persons, and their object is to help each individual to achieve a better life. They disagree with the ultimate in capitalism which believes in the furtherance of a few individuals at the expense of many, but neither do they support absolute socialism which sees the state as more important than the rights of any single person.

2. Social reform must come through education.

It is obviously impossible for people to bring about a change in social institutions unless they are first aware of what they are striving for and secondly the method by which they might achieve their object. This knowledge can only come through learning, and therefore education of the individual is a vital plank in the co-operative platform.

3. Education must begin with the economic.

All people absorb information more readily if it deals with a subject in which they have a personal interest. There are none with whom we deal who are not in one way or another affected by economic conditions and therefore they can be led more easily to a study of the Church's social theories if they see the application of their education in the economic affairs of their everyday life.

4. Education must be through group action.

This is line with the basic belief that people can act more effectively when acting together than as individuals. This applies not only to everyday affairs, but to the type of education through action which is the key-note of the co-operative movement. We believe that people can best learn to take control of their own affairs by experimenting and learning by their experience.

5. Effective social reform involves fundamental changes in social and economic institutions.

It is our belief that we must be prepared

more than merely to improve existing conditions if we are to bring about social reform. At times it will be necessary to set up support organizations entirely opposed to existing institutions and if necessary to build a set of conditions where certain institutions can no longer survive.

For example, we may deplore the poor service or high prices charged by a monopoly, but it may not be sufficient that we endeavor to have these prices reduced or the quality improved. It may well be that we would set up an organization to oppose the monopoly and in the long run to force it out of its position as the only supplier.

6. The ultimate objective of the movement is a full and abundant life for everyone in the community.

If we believe that every man can best carry out his vocation in life if he is freed from the restrictive shackles of poverty and other social evils, then we should aim for a situation where these evils are abolished and each person should have the best chance possible to carry out his task in life without impediments and so find it easier to save his soul.

Throughout the period of its existence the YCW Co-operative Movement promoted co-operation as practical Christianity. The Movement believed that co-operatives contributed to the "introduction of a Christian social order so that all citizens will be assisted to live full Christian lives" through "Economic and social co-operation coupled with education both based on Christian principles".

While membership of the co-operatives commenced with Catholics, non-Catholics joined the co-operatives provided they were in need and eligible according to geographical boundaries.

The YCW Co-operative Movement believed in a Christian social order "in which everything, including the laws of the country, the public institutions and the attitudes of the people were such that they would not in any way encourage non-Christian action, but would assist each member of the community to make the best use of his life as a Christian should. In such a social order we might well see the elimination of slums and bad housing, the encouragement of family life rather than divorce, equality of all in education, protection of



youth from bad literature, and in general every assistance to the individual to make the most of his life".

The YCW's Christian vision of co-operation was formally abandoned by the co-operative movement when the Association of Catholic Co-operative Credit Societies (ACCCS) became the Victorian Credit Co-operative Association (VCCA) in 1966, and when the Co-operative Development Society was replaced by the Co-operative Federation of Victoria (1970).

The catalyst for these changes was the 1964 report by YCW Co-operative Movement member Rob Maybury on his overseas tour between April and June of that year. In his report, Maybury posed the question: Should our Movement remain Catholic centred?

It is interesting to consider the relationship between this neutralization process and the current status of co-operative development.

In 1985 Meredith and Greer concluded that co-operative education and training in Victoria was minimal: "Current provision covers only a fraction of existing or potential co-operative target audiences identified". They estimated that only one in every four members of co-operatives had taken part in education and training programs. In June 1984 the Registrar of Co-operative Societies, Bill Kilpatrick, noted that the co-operative movement in Australia was "in its infancy". In 1984 the General Manager of the VCCA, David Dinning, lamented that "Financial co-operatives in particular have been guilty of not creating proper member awareness of the principles of co-operation and the basis on which their co-operative is operated."

The words "minimal", "infancy" and "guilty" amount to an effective criticism of co-operation and suggest the

absence of commitment and, in consequence, a corresponding absence of a conscious and explicit ideology.

Emerging forms of co-operatives in Victoria have, however, been demonstrating a diverse but explicit political consciousness. These have focused on their relationship to the Labor movement.

This politicization process shares with the YCW Co-operative Movement an ideological base but one which is primarily rooted in different historical antecedents - Australia's incipient co-operative socialism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

These newer co-operatives have not yet attained the sophisticated and ideological presence that the YCW Co-operative Movement achieved at its peak.

The potential of the newer co-operatives to develop into a credible co-operative socialism should not be over-stated. Their politicization is an impetus rather than a systematic and integrated ideological position, and it is premature to determine whether socialist inspirations and aspirations will remain and prevail - providing an ideological substance to co-operative development.

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Further reading:

Ministerial Advisory Committee on Co-operation Information Paper; *The Development of the Co-operative Movement in Victoria*, June 1984.

Democracy Through Education: The Development of Co-operative Education and Training in Victoria, December 1984.

Co-operation in Victoria: MACC Working Papers, June 1984.

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Long, Ted: *Helping Each Other Through Co-operatives*, ACTS Publications, 10 August 1965.

Murtagh, Rev James G: *The Story of Antigonish*, ACTS Publications, 20 July 1944.

Other

Carli, Carlo: *Organization of the Co-operative Movement in Italy*, Department of Employment and Industrial Affairs, 1985.

